

TIMES PHOTOS BY WILLIAM S. MURPHY



Actor George Burns and his perennial cigar are part of the cast in Magic Mountain puppet show.

PUPPETEER KNOWS ALL THE MOVES

By WILLIAM S. MURPHY
Times Staff Writer

When John Hardman was 9, his parents gave him a marionette for Christmas.

"I thought it was the dumbest gift Santa Claus could ever bring me," he recalled, sitting in his workshop backstage at Magic Mountain's new 1,500-seat theater. Today, Hardman is a master puppeteer producing an extravaganza of 200 string-controlled characters who walk, talk, sing and dance eight times a day in a 20-minute show directed and choreographed by Van Snoden.

Hidden from view on an elevated platform are 15 puppeteers who manipulate the movements of the cast, whose members average 30 inches in height.

The theme of the show is "Hooray for Hollywood" and a number of film personalities are featured in the pre-recorded dialogue and music.

"Sharon Bunn sings just like Judy Garland—numbers like 'Swanee,' 'Born in a Trunk,' and closes with a few bars of 'I've Got the World on a String.' I do George Burns and Burt Reynolds. My wife, Patti, is the voice of Phyllis Diller, Liza Minnelli and Raquel Welch. She also sings the part of an opera diva who competes with a howling dog at the Hollywood Bowl," Hardman said.

The production will run for a year, then move to one of the other Six Flags parks in the country. Hardman is already planning a new show, which will require nine months of preparation.

Hardman said one advantage of working with puppets instead of live performers is that there are no prima donnas: puppets can't argue with the director.

"Even so, you have problems," he said. "It's the puppeteers who argue with him."



Puppeteer John Hardman rehearses Charlie Chaplin before a show.

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Feb 4, 2025